

Dinosaur tracks luring thousands

Owners, scientist hope a museum will be built to preserve them

By Joe Bauman

Deseret News staff writer

Thousands of visitors have been trooping to a remote farm near St. George to see newly discovered dinosaur footprints. The interest is a powerful argument that the city should establish a museum, say the owners and the state paleontologist.

"We feel like it's a gift given, that we are caretakers for," said Sheldon Johnson's wife, LaVerna Johnson. "It's our responsibility to find a way to preserve them, to save them and to make it accessible for children to learn from."

Most visitors are careful and respectful. But one child kicked a footprint and another used a sharp rock to scratch around the outline of a meat-eater's track, damaging the ancient treasure.

The family will talk with city officials on Thursday about some protective arrangement for the fossil footprints,



Newly discovered dinosaur footprints on a farm have astonished the state paleontologist.

which so far number about 175.

Jim Kirkland, Utah's state paleontologist, is astonished by the superbly preserved footprints, which date to the start of the Jurassic era. He is scheduled to

report on them to the board of directors of the Utah Geological Survey on Friday. "It's a great site," he said. The tracks

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It had "three big, nasty claws" that show up in tracks.

Other species' tracks are represented. One type of footprint may be new to science.

In a future excavation of rock not yet moved, Kirkland hopes to reconstruct a dinosaur trackway.

The animals trooped across fine clay, material that preserved sharp detail in their footprints. In some cases, these include the imprints of claws and even dewclaws. The prints filled in with silt that later hardened into stone.

About seven weeks ago — or 180 million years after the dinos left

their tracks — Sheldon Johnson was leveling some of his land near St. George. A new road, Riverside Drive, had been constructed, the city had zoned the property as commercial, and the 73-year-old retired optometrist thought the land might be salable as a building site if it were flatter.

He used machinery to peel off layers of rock and load the stones onto a big truck. He hauled the sandstone away for disposal.

"But there were these big bumps on the rocks." When he took a closer look, she said, "they turned out to be dinosaur tracks."

The tracks are natural casts from the bottom of a layer of the sediment. They are bumps instead of impressions. They are on the underside of the rock layer and Johnson had to turn over the massive rocks in order to see them.

"You can see the claws, you can see the texture of the skin on some of them," she said. "It's just an extraordinary find."

Her daughter, an editor in a local newspaper, wrote about the find in an article that was reprinted nationally. Since then, thousands of visitors have found their way to the site. Some tracks have been stolen.

"We put a book down for people to sign 13 days ago," she said. The book has collected almost 10,000 names, representing 28 states and five foreign countries.

"We welcome them. We have a family member there," from morning until dark. The visitors are "very nice, very helpful."

The Johnsons hope St. George officials will help in handling the crowds.

"It's just our family and we're there from early in the morning until dark at night. We're getting a little volunteer help," but that's not enough, LaVerna Johnson said.

"The city is beginning to give us some parking facility. They're coming in to gravel an area and try to cut the dust down on the roads."

"I feel very strongly about having a museum here in St. George" to teach about dinosaurs and other scientific subjects, she added. "I feel pretty fiercely about having something of quality here in southern Utah, and Dr. Kirkland supports that."

Not only does Kirkland support that idea, but he lauds the Johnsons for their dedication to preserving the fossils rather than going for the quick buck and selling them on e-Bay.

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I WONDER
HOW THE
UNIVERSE
BEGAN?

SOME SCIENTISTS BELIEVE
IN THE "BIG BANG" THEORY



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BY MORT WALKER

EVERYTHING
WAS CREATED
BY A GIANT
EXPLOSION

SOUNDS MORE
LIKE THE **END**
INSTEAD OF THE
BEGINNING



I BELIEVE IT WAS MORE OF
A SLOW, GRADUAL PROCESS
THAT TOOK BILLIONS OF
YEARS



ONE BY ONE, LIVING
CREATURES WOKE FROM
A LONG, DEEP SLEEP



I CALL IT MY
"BIG SNOOZE"
THEORY

ONLY **YOU** COULD
COME UP WITH THAT



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